BOOK REVIEW

IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS

HOW DID YOU GET TO BE MEXICAN?: A WHITE/BROWN MAN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY[1]

BY KEVIN R. JOHNSON
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I. INTRODUCTION

You do not have to be white to be an American, and not everyone belongs to one race. In fact, Americans come in all skin colors and shades, and many claim a mixed racial identity. This acute observation and its implications are explored in *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?: A White/Brown Man's Search for Identity*[2] by University of California at Davis Law Professor Kevin Johnson. This substantial volume is packaged as an autobiographical essay exploring the "concept of race, the difficulties resulting from racial ambiguity, and the complexities of racial mixture in a time of identity politics."[3] With profound depth and superb storytelling, Johnson sets forth a powerful message: race does matter.

Other books written about Latinos have centered on the social and historical aspects of the Latino community, and are written by historians, sociologists, and other literary writers. Johnson's book stands apart be-

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1. KEVIN R. JOHNSON, HOW DID YOU GET TO BE MEXICAN?: A WHITE/BROWN MAN'S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY (1999).

2. JOHNSON, *supra* note 1.

3. *Id.* at 6.

cause it combines the social sciences and law and is written by a law professor at a major university. Without question, Johnson is well qualified to write this important work. He is a critical race scholar who has written widely on the subject matter.[4] His work may be described as part of the nascent LatCrit movement, an outgrowth of the leftist Critical Race Theory Movement which focuses specifically on Latinos.

II. SYNOPSIS

In his introduction, Johnson explains that his book is an alternative to the writings of Latino intellectuals Linda Chávez and Richard Rodriguez, who support total assimilation into the white Anglo culture.[5] Chávez and Rodriguez "have embraced the goal of Latino assimilation into the mainstream of American life."[6] Within this context, Johnson presents his thesis and sets the tone for the remainder of the book. The thesis is wrapped around the author's search for his racial identity, and Johnson uses a lengthy narrative as a vehicle to illuminate issues of race. As a bi-racial individual, Johnson's own personal experiences negotiate the color-line between white and brown, and lend credence to his primary argument: because America is far from being a color-blind society,[7] race influences life experiences, place in society, and can be a construction of self-identity.

A. *Childhood: Formulating Concepts of Race*

To understand and appreciate the arguments Johnson advances, it is necessary to understand his unique upbringing. He addresses his multicultural background, explaining that he is the son of a Mexican-Ameri-

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4. *See generally* Kevin R. Johnson, *An Essay on Immigration Politics, Popular Democracy, and California's Proposition 187: The Political Relevance and Legal Irrelevance of Race*, 70 WASH. L. REV. 629 (1995); Kevin R. Johnson, *Civil Rights and Immigration: Challenges for the Latino Community in the Twenty-First Century*, 8 LA RAZA L.J. 42 (1995); Kevin R. Johnson, *Immigration and Latino Identity*, 19 CHICANO-LATINO L. REV. 197 (1998); Kevin R. Johnson, *Public Benefits and Immigration: The Intersection of Immigration Status, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class*, 42 UCLA L. REV. 1509 (1995); Kevin R. Johnson, *Race, The Immigration Laws, and Domestic Race Relations: A "Magic Mirror" Into the Heart of Darkness*, 73 IND. L.J. 1111 (1998); Kevin R. Johnson, *Race Matters: Immigration Law and Policy Scholarship, Law in the Ivory Tower, and the Legal Indifference of the Race Critique*, 2000 U. ILL. L. REV. 525 (2000); Kevin R. Johnson, *Racial Hierarchy, Asian Americans and Latinos As "Foreigners," and Social Change: Is Law the Way to Go?*, 76 OR. L. REV. 347 (1997); Kevin R. Johnson, *Fear of An "Alien Nation": Race, Immigration, and Immigrants*, 7 STAN. L. & POL'Y. REV. 111 (1996) (book review).

5. JOHNSON, *supra* note 1, at 6.

6. *Id.*

7. *See, e.g.*, Frank H. Wu, *The Blind Spot in Color-Blind Debate*, ASIANWEEK, July 8, 1998, at 45.

can mother from the California Imperial Valley and an Anglo father descended from Swedish immigrant farmers who settled in California. From an early age, his Anglo last name and fair skin color called his racial identity into question.

As a young child, Johnson found himself in limbo between two approaches to race. His mother wanted him to assimilate, encouraging him to speak only English, while his father encouraged him to be proud of his ethnic background. In a genuine effort to reconcile his mother's assimilation expectations and his father's deep ethnic pride and interests, Johnson has spent all stages of his life developing his own racial identity and using his experience as a springboard to reflect upon race in American society.

In his years at West High School in Torrance, California, Johnson attended a predominantly white school. He observed that his classmates' reception of him varied depending on whether they perceived him as white or Mexican American. His own racial identity shifted back and forth from being a member of the privileged white majority to the racial minority. Despite obvious pressures to fit in as a "white," which he was able to do without effort, Johnson never completely forsook his Mexican-American heritage. By this point in his life, his parents were divorced, and Johnson spent time in both predominately white and racially mixed neighborhoods. While spending time with his mother, Johnson enjoyed participating in Mexican-American culture activities, and also studied Spanish for four years in high school.

Yet, Johnson notes that he acted and aspired to be "white" by putting down other non-whites and at times allowed others' assumptions that he was white go uncorrected. As a high school student seeking to be "one of the crowd," he accepted his friends' practice of routinely disparaging Mexican Americans and African Americans. Johnson also remembers times when he himself was the target of ridicule when his bi-racial background was uncovered. He learned that with or without a Spanish surname or ethnic physical features, he was different from the other white students.

B. *University of California—Berkeley: Facing Affirmative Action*

His experiences at the University of California—Berkeley further developed his thoughts on race. Even before he stepped foot on Berkeley's campus, Johnson faced an issue which would become important to him both pragmatically and in his studies for the rest of his life—affirmative action. When applying to Berkeley, Johnson checked the box identifying himself as Mexican American despite his often "white" identity. As an outgrowth of his experiences growing up, he wonders in this section of the book whether he did this to gain an "affirmative action" advantage or whether it was simply a true self-identification of his racial identity? This

struggle for self-identity was central to his experience at Berkeley, and was compounded by the thought of whether he would have been accepted if he had not identified himself as a Mexican American. In addition to his own self-concept of race, Johnson reflects on his experiences with other Latinos in academia, and leads into the race identification issues he faced in law school.

C. *Harvard Law School: Diversity Amongst Latinos*

Johnson shaped his identity as an anti-Harvard type from the very beginning, and he did not keep his politics to himself. He explains how, despite its liberal reputation, conservatives dominated Harvard Law School. Johnson felt alienated, and, as a result, often kept to himself. To Johnson's surprise, the issue of affirmative action resurfaced at Harvard. Here, Johnson discusses at length the reasons why Harvard Law School employed an affirmative action policy in student admissions—mainly to remedy past discrimination evidenced by the school's poor record of admitting minorities and women. He was struck by his classmates' myopic focus on race in the Harvard admissions process, shunning discussions on other seemingly arbitrary criteria used in the admission process, such as legacy admissions or geographic diversity. At the time, he explains, most Harvard Law students considered affirmative action suspect. Since students thought Johnson was white, they frequently commented about how few African Americans were really "qualified" to attend Harvard Law School, and how those who made it in could not have done so without affirmative action. Nevertheless, since Johnson had previously been a strong supporter of affirmative action, his views were only reinforced during law school.

His Harvard Law experience facilitated many personal observations. Of particular interest to Johnson was the way Latino and mixed Anglo/Latinos chose their racial identity on their own terms, a phenomenon he had been exposed to at Berkeley, on a less intense level. Johnson, however, was far from being representative of all Latino Harvard Law School students in both background and politics. Johnson's Latino classmates were just as varied as the Latino population in this country. These differences allowed Johnson to realize how racial identities are created, shaped, and refined. He also became aware that racial background does not necessarily serve as an adequate proxy for either a particular political viewpoint, or even friendship.

Here, Johnson makes three related points. First, he notes that his other Harvard classmates, who were also of mixed Latino backgrounds, formulated quite different identities based on their own personal experiences. Second, Johnson observes that Latinos of mixed backgrounds who did strive to be "white" were not the only assimilationists at Harvard Law School. Third, Latinos at Harvard in general hardly seemed representa-

tive of the broad diversity of Latinos in general, and were actually "whiter" than the average Latino. Most of them, Johnson explains, were conservative in lifestyle, and generally of middle class to upper class backgrounds. He found himself somewhere in between—not quite an assimilationist, but not fully accepted by or comfortable around the "radical" non-mixed Latinos.

Johnson relates these observations to Harvard's affirmative action program. To begin with, the mixed Anglo/Latinos at Harvard experienced some degree of identity choice. According to Johnson, most identified as Latino for affirmative action purposes, while socially, a person of a mixed background might or might not identify as Latino. This fact actually undermines any diversity rationale used in Harvard's affirmative action programs. He argues, that to the extent affirmative action programs attempt to attract minorities who identify with and plan to contribute to the minority community or serve as role models for other minorities, persons of mixed heritage must be considered for admission on an individual basis based on their own racial identification. Next, Johnson asserts that mere "box checkers" fail to serve any conceivable goal that affirmative action seeks to further. They neither act as role models nor go on to serve minority communities. He hypothesizes that Harvard as an institution benefited by the self-identification of the mixed Latinos, in that, the more who identify as minorities, the better it is for the institution. Johnson concludes that Latinos at the law school, including himself, were at some level used by the institution, though this use was also accompanied by its associated awards as well.

While many of the Latinos assimilated, Johnson, in his desire to stress his differences from the Harvard norm, was not reluctant to advertise his Mexican-American heritage to his classmates. He traces his self-identification as "Latino" from his rebellion against his mother's denial of her own Mexican ancestry, through his studies at University of California—Berkeley. Johnson's acceptance by Latinos at Harvard, however, was far from automatic due in part to his quasi-minority status, and accordingly, most of the friends he made at Harvard were white.

D. *Legal Academia: Self Identity and Tokenism*

After law school and a stint in the private sector, Johnson applied for a tenure track professorship, and again faced the thorny question of whether he should take advantage of his status as a quasi-minority. He hesitated, considering the implications of becoming the token representative of a racial group. Keeping this in mind, Johnson did market himself as a potential minority law professor. Although hiring practices for professorships do not follow clear-cut affirmative action plans similar to those used in student admissions, Johnson believed that members of ad-

mission committees considered race as a factor in evaluating applications, but were often less than explicit about their practice. In his view, minorities and other individuals who overcame their disadvantaged backgrounds were generally favored.

Johnson was hired by University of California—Davis and quickly noticed how his racial identification elicited sometimes disheartening interactions with students and other faculty members. Specifically, Johnson focuses on a normal function of law professors—reviewing faculty candidates' work for employment consideration at various law schools throughout the country. Since becoming a tenured professor at University of California—Davis, all but one of the reviews he has been asked to perform were for minority candidates. As an example of how important the issue of race was to faculty appointments not only for a minority applicant, but a minority reviewer as well, he notes that other members seek a genuine "American" name on review and do not discount his opinion. Johnson claims an all too common view is that a minority cannot review other minorities' work without any bias. For Johnson, he felt as though he was the "'stealth reviewer,' an invisible Latino who can fool the uninformed and avoid the Latino discount."[8] These experiences reminded Johnson that society is not color-blind. These insightful observations, combined with his own political views and social agenda have served him well in his transformation into a leading scholar on the subject of race.

E. *Culmination of Life: How Johnson's Life Experiences Are Reflected in LatCrit Theory*

Johnson's analysis of the emerging intellectual movement of LatCrit scholarship is saved for the last chapters of his book. The academic side, and in my opinion, the more interesting parts of *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?*, lies in the last two chapters where Johnson introduces two essays: "Lessons for Latino Assimilation" and "What Does This All Mean for Race Relations?"[9] Here, he reflects upon the victories of the ban on bilingual education in California and elsewhere, all in the context of the debate over the place of the Latino community within the broader American polity, specifically whether and how cultural or racial minorities can or should assimilate.

Johnson builds his arguments using his own personal struggle with his Latino identity presented in the preceding chapters of the book. Demonstrating the diversity of opinions in the Latino community, Johnson reiterates that Latinos are not a monolithic group; in fact, Latinos are extremely heterogeneous and include persons of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto

8. JOHNSON, *supra* note 1, at 133.
9. *Id.* at 152-82.

Rican, Central American, and other Latin American ancestry.[10] Although Latinos are a diverse group, they share, depending on their physical appearance, the commonality of racism.[11] In fact, Johnson suggests that Latinos are often the subject of discrimination based on physical appearance. Like African Americans, Latinos have argued that they are often victims of racial profiling.[12]

Johnson observes that "Mexican Americans who fit the stereotype—dark-skinned with indigenous features—are more likely than other Mexican Americans to be stopped, questioned, or worse, by immigration authorities in border communities."[13] Having the physical appearance of a stereotypical Mexican can lead to distinctly "special treatment."[14] Johnson also discusses the fact that Latinos face a different set of assimilation obstacles depending on their skin color. He states that "Black skinned Latinos face an entirely different set of assimilation obstacles. They cannot 'pass' as white and are often seen not as Latinos but as African Americans, with the harsh stigma U.S. society attaches to being black."[15]

The author reveals the political tension between Latinos of different national origins, and suggests that national differences seem to overshadow any collective "Latino" identity.[16] Further, Johnson explains how other non-whites help support his argument that a racial hierarchy exists in this country. He argues that in an effort to expand race relations accommodating the multiracial, multicultural, and constantly changing population in the United States, projects such as President Clinton's Race Initiative, which are endeavors to bring about serious social change by understanding how the complexities of race operate as a whole in maintaining subordination, should be encouraged. He argues that "[t]o achieve racial justice in the United States, the subordination of other minorities—must be accounted for in the national civil rights debate."[17]

III. CONCLUSION

In modern race relations, *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?* functions as a text which provides specific lessons about the relationship between

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10. *See id.* at 161.
11. *See id.* at 162.
12. *See id.*
13. *Id.* at 161.
14. *Id.*
15. *Id.* at 162.
16. *See id.* at 163.
17. *Id.* at 177. *See also* K. ANTHONY APPIAH & AMY GUTMAN, COLOR-CONSCIOUSNESS: THE POLITICAL MORALITY OF RACE 107 (1996) (examining and attempting to define racial justice, which they contend is "the most morally and intellectually vexing problem in the public life of this country").

race and law, and how political power is created and maintained. Indeed, Johnson's work makes a major contribution to the discussion on the oppression facing racial minorities. His analytical model examining social practices regarding race is useful in gaining a meaningful understanding of the social construction of minority groups throughout the law. Although this phenomenon has deep historical roots, it nonetheless persists in the modern era.

Johnson's work is significant, if, for no other reason, that it is about Latinos. Johnson is quick to inform the reader that the Latino community is extremely diverse. They represent mixtures of race, national origin, immigration status, class, culture, education, political viewpoint, and other characteristics.[18] Due to this complexity, little has been written which fully covers all issues that affect Latinos. This dearth of literature is underscored by the fact that most of the books which address race focus on the traditional black-white paradigm which evolved from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.[19]

Overall, Johnson's biography supports the ideal that racial identity, though influenced greatly by society as a whole, remains a personal choice. By succeeding in negotiating the color-line, he demonstrates that it is certainly possible to debunk the myth of the necessity to fully assimilate into the American mainstream in order to succeed. As much as America is becoming increasingly diverse each day, books which address the issue of race, and particularly mixed race individuals, have become extremely relevant and timely. Johnson's *How Did You Get to Be Mexican?* is certain to become influential as a source for anyone interested about the racial and cultural politics of identity which has always existed, and which is likely to persist in America.

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18. *See* JOHNSON, *supra* note 1, at 8. Johnson suggests:

> Changing demographics make the circumstances of mixed race Latinos all the more important to consider. By 2005 Latinos will be the largest minority group in the U.S. If the current demographic trends continue, persons of mixed race backgrounds will increase greatly as a proportion of the U.S. population. Race relations and individual experiences of race are sure to change as a result.

Id.

19. *See generally* RACHEL F. MORAN, UNREPRESENTED IN RACE AND REPRESENTATION: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION 254 (1998) ("The mixed message of the civil rights paradigm, which is rooted in the black experience, is that Latinos have been treated similarly to blacks, but in reality they are more like white ethnic immigrants."); Enid Trucio-Haynes, *Latino/as in the Mix: Applying Gotanda's Models of Racial Classification and Racial Stratification*, 4 ASIAN L.J. 39 (1997) (suggesting that Latinos have been perceived by the white majority as a racial group "foreign and unassailable," and not fitting neatly into the formalistic black-white bipolar framework which dominates discussion about race in the United States).